



**Part
One**

**General Issues in
Academic Writing
and Communication**

1

Managing the Writing Environment

Developmental Objectives

By applying the strategies, doing the exercises and following the procedural steps in this chapter, you should be able to:

- Take a pro-active approach to reducing the psychological and physical stress that typically accompanies academic writing and communication.
- Identify a range of strategies for managing more efficiently yourself and your writing in the context of your life commitments and goals.
- Ensure results-oriented communication with your lecturers and supervisors, including email communication.
- Understand some cross-cultural challenges in terms of writing and communication, why these exist and how you might address them.

It is common for graduates to experience ups and downs with academic writing and communication. Your feelings of confidence, excitement, self-doubt, disinterest, frustration, lack of motivation, isolation and so forth may alternate, and it is important to recognize such mood swings as typical rather than unusual. This chapter covers a broad range of management strategies designed to reduce stress and improve the quality of your writing environment.

Effective self-management

While networking requires effort, it can be worth the investment of your valuable time, particularly if you are enrolled in a longer research degree.

NETWORKING FOR SUPPORT

These networking strategies should help alleviate stress while contributing to a greater sense of integration in the academic community at large.

Generate peer support: local, national and international Students in your course or research group will prove an excellent support resource, so be proactive in making yourself known to them. Make contact too with the graduate student organization within your institution, if there is one. Such organizations usually provide a range of social and academic support, are often advocates for resolution of issues of concern to graduates, and may represent graduates' interests on important institutional committees.

Understanding more about what is going on for graduate students in general can afford a welcome sense of solidarity. Ask whether there is a national student organization representing graduate interests that you should know about. Websites of these organizations can contain informative material regarding the current status of graduate and research education in your country (see for example: *National Postgraduate Committee* <<http://www.npc.org.uk/>>; *Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations* <<http://www.capa.edu.au/>> or the US site, *National Association of Graduate-Professional Students* <<http://www.nagps2.org/frame-top.cfm>>). Government departments responsible for higher education also produce publications that you might like to browse in, again with a view to becoming more informed.

There are numbers of international graduate student and dissertation support sites on the Internet. Many enquiries about writing are posted on such sites, as is copious information about 'surviving' graduate studies. Even joining a chat group with other graduates sharing your interests can lend support – discuss this possibility with peers and academics in your area.

One well-established international site is the *Association for Support of Graduate Students* <<http://www.asgs.org/>>, a US site that provides a news and reference bulletin for graduates writing theses and includes *Doc-Talk*, a free, moderated email discussion list about doing a thesis (lots of useful tips). Another is the *Postgraduates' International Network* <<http://www.postgrad.org/>>. This is a European-founded organization (with rather a strong science focus) aimed at promoting international cooperation among graduate student associations and facilitating communication within the international graduate community. The site is still under development and may contain more information specific to writing and communication issues in the future.

Identify institutional resources available for developmental assistance There is now considerable academic learning assistance offered within institutions at

different levels of the institution and in various contexts – graduate schools, faculties, centres and departments, academic skills or writing centres, or by lecturers and supervisors.

You should thoroughly network your institution's website home page to find out what supplementary assistance is on offer. Network across institutions too as you may locate the precise materials you need on another institution's site, where these are accessible. Academic skills, learning or writing centres of different institutions in different countries often provide electronic resources specific to graduate writing and communication that may prove useful. Whatever you turn up that seems relevant, do check with your lecturer/supervisor that the advice is sound in their view.

Make use of visiting scholars and other disciplinary experts Introduce yourself to visiting scholars and attend any conferences/seminars they give while at your institution. Where the research interests coincide, a visiting scholar may be willing to give advice on communication tasks, and even provide feedback on your drafts. You could also benefit from contact with other disciplinary experts.

Box 1.1 Other disciplinary experts can be a valuable resource

CASE STUDY Example

A doctoral student realized when writing up that there was a gap in her reading (not an unusual occurrence!). She needed an overview of one aspect of a famous philosopher's work about which she knew little, as she was not a philosophy student. A quick database search turned up literally hundreds of potential sources that left her, as she said, *'totally depressed'*. So she rang around to identify an expert in nineteenth-century philosophy, and asked him if he could refer her to an appropriate source for what she needed. This he did. And, in her own words: *'This saved me heaps of time – there were just so many sources – really put me on the right track with my reading.'*

Actively elicit understanding of close ones You may be relying on partners, family and friends for primary support when writing. But sometimes it can be difficult for those closest to accept what appears to them to be inflexibility, or even selfishness on your part, when you are unavailable for a social invitation or a request for help. A doctoral student struggling with this very dilemma had this to say:

My biggest problem in the whole business is time-management ... it's hard for me to claim the 'right' to sufficient space for the job in hand, telling myself too often that I can mind a grandchild, have coffee with someone, or take time out to go shopping when it's really not a good idea at the time. This is probably a very common problem, especially for women in my position who have a partner, children, grandchildren, friends and elderly parents or relatives – all claiming a piece of one's life which one feels is their due anyhow. There is no definitive answer, I feel, apart from progress in the art of self-assertion, and self-discipline, along with the realization that the university is paying (in the case of a scholarship student) for a task to be done and therefore has a right to expect full value for money.

Of course you may be the one who is paying for your degree, and paying dearly. That aside, as this type of dilemma is not unusual, you may need to work at gaining more understanding of those close to you (see also the balanced self-management exercise below that encourages building relationship goals into your time management). Tell them well in advance that there will be times when you will not be available, and remind them of this when such occasions arise. Perhaps, too, keep reminding them, and yourself, that whatever the duration of your studies, the period will come to an end.

By identifying peak writing periods in advance (see the next section), you will be able to give partners, family and friends ample warning.

Network your own resources It is not easy to find the right words to express complex ideas, to structure or organize material on the scale of, say, a dissertation, a long report or essay, or to develop subtle arguments and discussions. Writing is an intellectually demanding task and one that rarely goes smoothly. As one student said: *'Writing is a matter of thinking writing, thinking writing, thinking writing – it is never just writing.'*

There will be difficult spots. At such times there can be a tendency to be harshly self-critical, even to resurrect inner saboteurs ('I've never been any good at writing'), to use negative reinforcers that cement a sense of failure. It is then necessary to network your own resources with a view to positively reinforcing your efforts, to recall past and present academic successes, to be patient with yourself, to remember that the act of writing is always about learning to write (it is little different with presenting), to genuinely value your own efforts, and to visualize that degree certificate in your hand – it will happen.

PRE-PLANNING: MAXIMIZING EFFORT

On a global level, maximizing effort involves effective self-management in all sectors of your life. It is near impossible to maximize effort in terms of communication activities in a course of study or research if other significant areas of your life are under strain. Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1994) invites the understanding that how we respond to time, how we understand time, how we behave in time and organize our time is nothing but habit, and all habits can be changed to meet changing circumstances, which is sometimes necessary.

Exercise: balanced self-management

Step 1

Review closely the 'The self-management matrix' in Figure 1.1. Thinking about the implications of these four quadrants for your own situation may prove illuminating, particularly if you are writing a thesis in a research-only degree, where there are no course deadlines to meet.

Effective self-management means avoiding the trap of Quadrant 1 (all too easy for busy graduates), of being driven to the time-wasting distractions of Quadrant 4 because of Quadrant 1 pressures and stress, or of attributing undue importance to the activities of Quadrant 3, which need to be monitored closely. It means training yourself to reside comfortably in Quadrant 2 as much as possible, for as Covey says:

The way you spend your time is a result of the way you see your time and the way you really see your priorities. If your priorities grow out of a principle center and a personal mission, if they are deeply planted in your heart and in your mind, you will see Quadrant II as a natural exciting place to invest your time. (1994: 158)

If study/research is a deeply embedded, principle-centred priority in your life, then work towards embedding this priority as a set of balanced life activities. Generate expectations focused on preserving and enhancing relationships and on achieving results. Develop a clear idea of the results you desire in your life, and organize and execute around priorities aimed at these results.

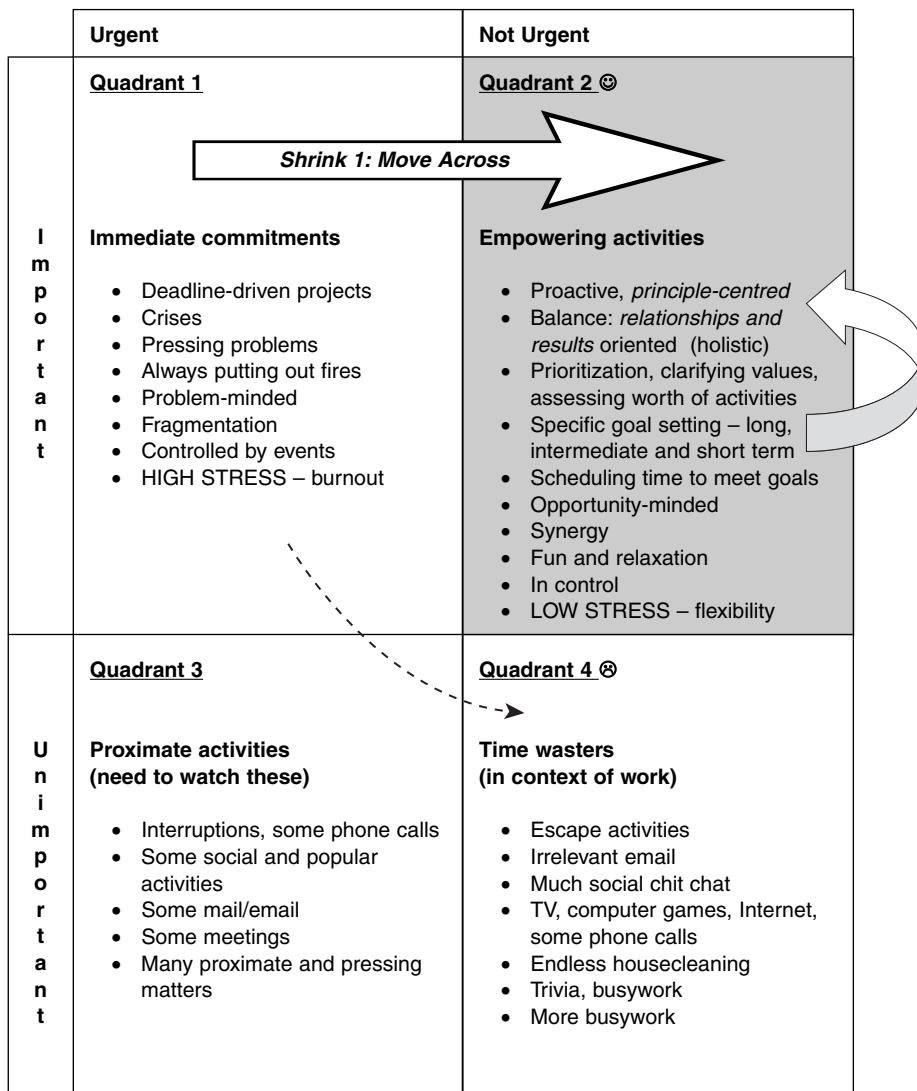


FIGURE 1.1 The self-management matrix (adapted from Covey, 1994: 151)

Step 2

Detail all regular commitments, and include prioritized weekly goals in terms of desired results. Do this for each of the four sectors tabulated below, with the aim of achieving balanced self-management:

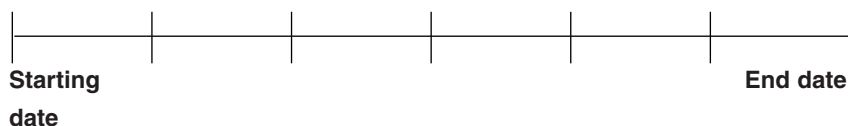
Research/Study/ Writing	Work/Teaching	Relationships	Individual/personal development
		Partner? Children? Other family members? Friends?	Physical Mental Emotional Spiritual
(Detail priorities and specific goals for the week in terms of desired results)			<i>(It is important not to exclude your private/ personal needs)</i>

Step 3

Set up a **weekly timetable**. Build in flexibility – allow for (at least in your mind) the unanticipated ‘urgent’ of Quadrant 1. A scheduled activity might need to be passed over because of a higher value (for example, a sick child). Better still, is a **yearly diary** in which you can detail goals, and activities to meet those goals, week-by-week.

Step 4

Set up a timeline that gives you an overview of your whole course (whether a research or coursework degree):



Mark along the timeline **priority dates** (for example, due dates for items of coursework assessment, or dates for seminar/conference papers, progress review papers, thesis outlines or chapters, etc.). As these become known, include in

your yearly diary advance deadlines and dates for preparatory activities to meet those deadlines.

Focusing your energies On a more immediate level, individual circumstances, course requirements, personal preferences and peak energy flows can influence when you write and how you organize your writing time and other communication activities. Some students concentrate better in shorter periods, taking frequent short breaks. Others prefer longer writing periods with fewer but longer breaks. Some work a 9 to 5 day, or stay up half the night and sleep late. Some see no choice but to write at night after full-time employment and/or when the children have gone to bed. But is this the only choice?

CASE STUDY
Example

Box 1.2 Maximize effort by harnessing your natural biorhythms

One graduate in full-time employment and with a young family presented with anxiety because he was *'getting behind'* in the writing of a long research report. He felt confident about writing the report, but said he was *'just too tired to write at night'* and doubted he could *'get it done'*. As he thought of himself as *'a morning person'*, it seemed reasonable to suggest he reorganize his writing time: rise two hours earlier in the morning to write (5 days a week), and reserve every Sunday from 10am to 2pm for writing until the task had been completed. He enlisted support from his partner in this and found it worked well for him.

Regularizing your writing pattern Whatever your circumstances, try to establish a regular writing pattern that is viable for you, allows you to write when you are likely to be most productive, given your various commitments, and that can be adjusted when necessary. Graduates have reported that regularizing the writing pattern helped them in these ways:

- Reduced the anxiety often associated with the 'I'll write when I can' approach, an approach that easily leads to writing being put off.
- Encouraged thinking through the setting up of a detailed writing schedule.
- Provided a stronger sense of working steadily towards completion of the writing task.

- Increased confidence in completing the task given their many and varied commitments.
- Allowed them to forewarn family and friends of their unavailability at certain times, which in turn reduced household stress.

Boosting your motivation Motivation is another issue frequently raised by graduates. It is of course impossible to remain highly motivated month in, month out over the years of a long research degree, or even during a shorter degree. Motivation levels do fluctuate. But your inner ‘motivator’ may at times need a full recharge. Perhaps your interest in your project is depleted – you feel bored, or your confidence has plunged and you seriously doubt your potential, or you are frustrated because you cannot get the help you need, or a troubled relationship is claiming all your attention, or you are oppressed by financial struggle, or it all seems a terrible grind. Any one, or a combination of these factors, can make you feel flat, not motivated at all.

At this point **STOP!** Try to pin down what is causing you to feel so unmotivated. Address the particular problems sapping your motivation, perhaps by talking these over with a professional counsellor, so as to take control of the situation.

Box 1.3 Significant life changes may be necessary to recharge your inner motivator

This is how one doctoral student (two years into a research degree), who presented as *‘totally unmotivated’*, being *‘bored with the whole thing’* and just wanting *‘out’*, turned his situation around:

- Lifestyle changes to achieve a better balance, which included improved diet and joining a gym with his partner.
- Development of a comprehensive time plan so that he could alert his partner to periods of peak demand in advance and so alleviate pressures on the relationship.
- Visualization strategies from a counsellor to build confidence.
- Regular advice and assistance from an academic skills adviser to overcome a fear of failure centred on writing.

CASE STUDY
Example

Engaging in pro-active strategies to manage physical stress is no less important than for psychological stressors.

AVOIDING OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD

More attention is now being given to the health hazards accompanying long hours of sitting at a computer or desk. It is best to vary your activities as much as you can. Intersperse computer work with other tasks such as reading, organizing or reviewing notes, working out graphs, tables or figures, monitoring experiments, drafting ideas for the next chapter, outlining an essay or report and so forth, anything that you might be able to do *off* the computer. Make your tasks multi-various, particularly when producing lengthy texts like theses and long reports.

Also, get advice or material from the occupational health service in your institution on how best to avoid Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS), which can lead to such disabilities as Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). Overuse injuries appear to be increasing among graduates. The tips provided in Figure 1.2 will help you to manage the physical strain of working with a computer.

Managing the writing

While effective self-management itself aids management of the writing, other issues may arise.

MANAGING MULTIPLE COMMUNICATION TASKS

Managing communication tasks can be complicated, particularly if you are a coursework student with several items of assessment for different courses due around the same time. This type of situation tends to cause coursework graduates much anxiety. As a research student, you may also have converging deadlines, and feel the resulting pressure. To improve your management of multiple communication tasks, consider these procedural steps well in advance.

WORKSTATION ENVIRONMENT EXERCISES








<p>WHAT TO DO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sit upright – chair supporting lower back. • Keep thighs and forearms parallel (or angled slightly down) with floor, feet flat on floor, neck straight, and elbows at waist. • Place mouse on same level as keyboard to avoid raised shoulder; mouse close to side of keyboard and body to avoid an outstretched arm; alternate sides each week. • Position screen, use document holder and learn to touch type in order to attain a straight neck posture. • NOW: RELAX ALL BODY PARTS 		 <p>Head and Neck</p>  <p>Upper Back</p>  <p>Shoulders</p>	<p>Head and Neck Gently turn head to left, then to right. Lower chin gently to chest, and then raise head until looking straight ahead. Repeat several times.</p> <p>Upper Back Grasp raised arm below elbow. Gently pull elbow towards opposite shoulder. Repeat with other arm.</p> <p>Shoulders Roll shoulders forward in a circular motion five times, then reverse direction.</p>
<p>WHAT TO AVOID</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resting wrists on desk when keying or pausing. • Chair too low; chair pressure on back of knees. • Sustained neck flexion and/or twisting. <p>TAKE CARE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eyes – if you experience vision problems at the computer, consult your optometrist. If you perform more than 25% VDU work, have your eyes checked regularly. 		 <p>Wrists</p>  <p>Hands and Fingers</p>	<p>Wrists Extend arms in front of body. Raise and lower hands. Repeat several times. Rotate hands in one direction several times, and then reverse direction.</p> <p>Hands and Fingers Form fingers into a fist, then release by spreading fingers wide apart with palm down. Repeat several times.</p>

FIGURE 1.2 Occupational health and safety tips for working with computers

(Source: Brochure *Don't let your posture cost you!* Produced by The Occupational Health and Safety Unit at The Australian National University)

(NOTE: VDU desk should be a minimum of 900 mm deep x 1200 mm wide)

Exercise: multiple communication task planning

Step 1

Count the number of days that remain to the due date of your last item of assessment.

Step 2

Work out how many days from your total number of days you wish to allot to each item of assessment. Consider the value of each item of assessment in doing this – an item worth 20 per cent does not warrant time equal to an item worth 80 per cent.

Step 3

Nominate an end-date for completion of all tasks for each item of assessment. Your end-dates will not be the same as *actual* submission dates or exam dates, as indicated below for three hypothetical items of assessment to take place in one week in June:

(1st essay due 16 June): end-date for completion 9 May

(2nd essay due 18 June): end-date for completion 3 June

(Exam on 20 June): end-date for all revision 19 June

The end-dates here signal completion of one item before moving on to the next. You may prefer to work simultaneously on specific tasks associated with two or more items (for example, database searching for the second essay while drafting the first).

Step 4

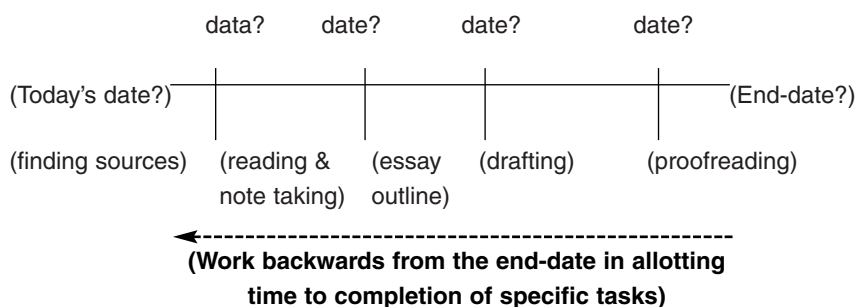
Discriminate tasks needing to be done to meet your end-date for each item of assessment. For example, for an essay (see 'The research essay' in Chapter 5), these tasks might be:

- Search for appropriate source material after brainstorming the topic (see 'Topics or (questions)' in Chapter 5).
- Read identified source material and take notes.

- Produce an essay outline (see 'Visual mapping of material' and 'Sequential outlining' in Chapter 4).
- Draft the essay (one, two or three drafts?).
- Proofread, check accuracy of references, tables and other illustrations, and polish presentation.

Step 5

Now set up timelines for the different items of assessment. Include rough estimates of time to complete the specific tasks for each item of assessment, as indicated below by way of my essay example:



Pin your different timelines above your regular workstation so that you can monitor your progress in meeting deadlines. As writing is hard intellectual work, in setting up timelines of this type do allow sufficient time for drafting and completing papers.

BEING REALISTIC ABOUT THE DEMANDS OF WRITING

You may have concerns about the time and effort it takes to write (many graduates do), and such concerns may linger even if you seem to be progressing well. Whether there are actual problems requiring attention, or whether the amount of time and effort expended is to be expected given the difficulty of the writing task, can be a moot point. If you do have serious concerns along these lines, consider the following exercise. Interesting patterns and insights can emerge from this type of close scrutiny of your own writing.

Writing is intellectually hard work. So do be generous in allotting time to complete your writing tasks.

Exercise: self-monitoring when writing

Step 1

On the next occasion of writing, monitor under what conditions you feel stuck (for example, generating ideas about your topic; uncertainty about how to proceed with the type of writing you are doing; organizing your paragraphs or linking parts of your discussion; marshalling evidence in an argument and ensuring logical development of your ideas; or writing up a theory section or chapter).

Step 2

Take concise notes about these instances. Note what is actually happening, why you think it is happening (if you can), and how long it takes you to overcome the difficulty – a matter of hours? days? or what? Also monitor how many days/weeks it takes you from the first phase of writing to completion of the draft.

Step 3

Make an appointment with a lecturer, supervisor, or a language, learning or writing adviser to discuss your notes.

Confronting the 'writing block' As many students phrase their difficulties in terms of 'writing blocks', the subject does need airing. This is a somewhat fuzzy concept that generally translates as: 'I just can't write.' But do take heart. Writing blocks can usually be traced to quite identifiable factors, often interrelated. Typical factors are:

- Confusion about specific task requirements, such as uncertainty about how to proceed with a particular type of writing or part of it, or not having to hand the type of information needed to complete the task (see 'Preparing the ground' in Chapter 2).
- Uncertainty about expectations of academic writing practices and how to take control of specific situations, like avoiding plagiarism (see 'Reflecting on current practice' in Chapter 3).
- Insufficient control of strategies for whole text development (see 'Whole text development' in Chapter 4).

- An incomplete understanding of subject matter, perhaps because time pressures have thwarted attempts to build up a thorough understanding of your material, in which case review your time management.

Computers too can feature in writing problems. Computers allow you many advantages when writing, including shifting chunks of material within and across documents. But shifting material around can contribute to incoherence in writing. Print out texts that you have altered by shifting material around. It seems to be easier to identify disruptions to the flow of a discussion, and other substantive problems, by reading a printout than by moving down a screen.

Nevertheless, deeply rooted psychological problems (for example, a fear of writing or over-perfectionism) can cause severe blockages in which case they may need to be worked through with a professional counsellor at your institution. These few tips should otherwise help you to cut through writing blocks:

- Ensure you do allow sufficient time to complete your writing tasks. Sometimes the stress occasioned by having to rush the writing to meet deadlines itself becomes a block.
- Do not delay writing. As I repeatedly stress, it is important to start writing early and to keep writing. To begin writing a first draft of a thesis or long report without having produced writing along the way that will feed into it is not a good idea.
- If you are finding it difficult to start writing, access the writing at a point at which it seems least difficult. Usually some parts are easier to write than others. Do not concern yourself too much with issues of focus and structure – just get ideas down.
- Try not to leave off writing at a point at which you feel blocked. This makes it harder to return to the writing. Knowing where you are going in your writing provides incentive to return to it.

HANDLING CRITICAL FEEDBACK

Another important issue in managing the writing concerns critical feedback. Criticism is a valuable feedback mechanism. Understandably though, students can be sensitive to criticism of their drafts and presentations. Where the criticism is perceived as unduly harsh, some become so upset their confidence

plunges and they are left feeling vulnerable. If this should happen, it is important to remember that it is your writing that is being criticized (or it should be), not you:

- Seek immediate support from your institution's counselling centre if you are very upset.
- Put aside your draft for a few days until you can assess the criticisms with more detachment.
- Think carefully about the usefulness of the criticisms in terms of your research focus and objectives, your arguments, structure and so forth.
- Discuss the criticisms further with your lecturer/supervisor if you feel the need.
- Where you do decide to reject certain criticisms, think about *why* so that you can communicate your reasons clearly to your lecturer/supervisor.
- If you think it will help, seek assistance from an academic skills, learning or writing adviser when redrafting.

Sometimes though, it is not the criticism itself but the tone of the criticism that upsets. You may perceive comments as overly aggressive or condescending. Take this up with your supervisor/lecturer if you feel able to. Let them know that, while you value their critical feedback, you were upset by the way this was given; have an example or two to show if they ask: 'What do you mean'?

Many students also mention the unbalanced nature of critical feedback on their writing. They say that lecturers and supervisors seem to perceive useful feedback as consisting solely in negative comments and give no positive feedback at all. Yet as one student astutely observed of her supervisor:

I'm sure my supervisor has no idea how destructive it is to constantly rip apart my writing – it makes me feel so stupid. But I know he means to be helpful – he makes lots of effort when he reads my drafts – thinks about everything – makes lots of suggestions. He's a good supervisor in many ways – he's great to discuss ideas with, and tries to help. He probably thinks he's doing the right thing.

Supervisors may well perceive detailed criticism as the most effective method to help you revise your drafts. If the criticism is overly negative, next time you submit a draft ask your supervisor to comment on the positive aspects as well as areas for improvement. Most importantly, try to extract value from the

criticism and use it to improve drafts and presentations – do not take it too personally.

Communicating with lecturers and supervisors

Good communication is the key to establishing positive working relationships with your lecturers and supervisors. Never think that you may be thought inadequate because of some question (however trivial) you want to ask – you are always learning and your lecturer/supervisor is there to help you progress. Also, never assume that your supervisor will recognize that you do need help – supervisors are busy, preoccupied people too, and may think that all is going well for you if you do not tell them otherwise.

Ask questions – any questions you want to ask – and keep asking them until you understand, until the matter is clarified or resolved.

RESOLVING UNCERTAINTIES

Simple communication queries may be quickly answered in class or even in casual conversation with your lecturer/supervisor at a chance meeting. If, however, you have more substantive enquiries, or indeed are having serious problems, you will need to take action to resolve these by arranging a meeting with your lecturer or supervisor.

Exercise: resolution action planning

Step 1: clarifying the nature of your uncertainties

Clarify the nature of your uncertainties before the meeting takes place by considering questions of this type:

- What precisely do I need to clarify or sort out (detail these)?
- Under what conditions do my uncertainties about writing/communication arise (try to be specific)?
- What outcomes do I hope for in a meeting with my lecturer/supervisor (jot these down)?

Step 2: setting up a discussion agenda

Setting up a discussion agenda is a useful strategy when initiating meetings with your lecturer or supervisor. When you have clarified precisely what you wish to discuss and reasons for doing so:

- Make a concise dot-point list for discussion (your agenda).
- Give your lecturer/supervisor a copy of your agenda before the meeting so that she/he has time to review your points.

Step 3: at the meeting

It is very easy for any meeting to become sidetracked, and when you meet with your lecturer/supervisor, you want the discussion to remain focused on your concerns:

- If the lecturer/supervisor begins to digress (students often report this), try to re-focus his/her attention on your agenda, those points worked out during the clarification process.
- Keep an eye on time so that you will be able to get through all the points on your agenda.
- You want the meeting to be helpful to you, so do not hesitate to say so if you are still not clear about what your lecturer/supervisor is advising.

EMAIL COMMUNICATION ISSUES

Email communication between students and lecturers/supervisors is increasingly popular, convenient, easy to use and may afford a welcome degree of anonymity not possible in face-to-face conversation. It can be an appropriate and effective medium of communication. Still, where there is a choice of communication media (for example, face-to-face-talk, telephone or email), it is worth considering whether email is the best option given the nature of your subject matter, the purpose of your communication and a possible need for privacy. Certainly, issues do arise in terms of the appropriateness and effectiveness of email as a medium of communication between graduates and their lecturers/supervisors.

Appropriateness

- Will your lecturer/supervisor welcome your emails? If yes, clarify the purposes for which email communication is to be used before dashing one off. Determine

whether there are any restrictions on what types of emails lecturers/supervisors might welcome and when (for example, making an appointment might be welcomed whereas expecting written comments – let alone copious comments – on an attached draft might not).

- Email communication may seem a less confrontational forum for discussing sensitive or difficult matters, but it may not be the most appropriate for resolution of these matters. It can be difficult to encode in written communication nuances of feeling, to achieve a fuller understanding without those non-verbal cues that can be so vital in resolution dialogue. Perhaps a telephone conversation or face-to-face-talk might be a better option.
- Avoid dashing off an email if you are feeling angry or upset about something, one that may antagonize or alienate the recipient. It is most important to practise self-censoring – sit on the email for a day or night until you have calmed down. Think further about the wording of your email before hitting the send button, or maybe you should not send it at all.
- Privacy or confidentiality can never be assured with email, and deletion does not mean final erasure. Emails can go to the wrong address, others may have access to the recipient's computer, the recipient can pass emails on without a sender's permission, and they can be retrieved from servers after deletion. So think twice about using this medium if confidentiality is a high priority.

Effectiveness

- The quality of the relations between you and your lecturer/supervisor will influence the effectiveness of your email communications. Where there is trust and openness, these should work well. But where tensions exist, particularly in a context of unequal power relations, email might not be the best choice. At least think about it.
- The desired timescale of the communication can also affect effectiveness. Many students report frustration at delayed responses, or no response at all. This might mean that the lecturer/supervisor is away, that the email is not welcomed, that it has been accidentally overlooked in a hundred other unread emails (a big problem) or that the pressure of overall responsibilities has prevented the lecturer/supervisor from providing a timely response. A follow-up email may help, but not necessarily – you may still need to telephone or make a face-to-face appointment if possible.

- Clarity of communication is also important. As with any written text, it is important to think carefully about audience needs and overall text quality to ensure a message will be clearly understood by the recipient. It is easy for misunderstandings to arise with hastily put together emails, and so invite an unhelpful or negative response.
- Providing critical feedback on (sometimes lengthy) texts via email is, in my experience of doing this, a somewhat unsatisfactory option for both lecturer and student, but perhaps the only option. The on-line medium itself constrains development of the more task-sensitive dialogue developed in face-to-face communication, which is so valuable in negotiating understanding about textual production and settling on strategies for improvement. So bear this in mind if the email feedback seems somewhat brusque or even insensitive.

As a final point, where sensitive issues are being dealt with via email over time, keep hard-copy records in case there is a future need to review this ‘conversation’ as, for example, in resolving differences of opinion about what transpired in the course of events.

Issues in cross-cultural writing and communication

Many of the writing and communication challenges experienced by international students are similar to those experienced by other graduates, so do review the previous discussions. None the less, it is unwise to assume that what has previously worked for you will do so now, and equally unwise to attribute all communication difficulties to a problem with English if English is a second language, perhaps even a third. Cross-cultural issues of the following type may arise because of your embedded expectations about teaching and learning and the conduct of relations between students and academic staff.

- **Taking a fully critical approach:** It will be expected that you do take a fully critical approach to all materials being worked in your writing and communication. If the need for analysis, critical appraisal and argument in writing is proving difficult and challenging, the section on ‘Treating information critically’ in Chapter 2 will help; also review ‘Evidence and reasoning’ in Chapter 5.
- **Using the disciplinary language:** Using the disciplinary language (as distinct from English) may also cause you concern when writing and presenting, in which

case spend more time on 'Linguistic features' in the exercise under 'Mastering (inter)disciplinary writing practices' in Chapter 2.

- **Acquiring independence as a researcher:** If you come from a culture where the teacher/supervisor is viewed as the authority from whom the student is to learn, you may expect that your supervisor will direct every stage of your studies or research. A major expectation in Western universities is that students be self-directed, with guidance from a lecturer/supervisor. This is a crucial reason to talk through a supervisory relationship early, so that you are clear about what will be expected of you and what you can expect from your supervisor. What you find out could be very different from what happens in your home country. Also, different supervisors will have different expectations.
- **Accepting guidance as a researcher:** If you are returning to study from a position of authority and respect in your home country (perhaps even as a senior academic), you may find it hard becoming a student again. Your adjustment in this case may invite strategies quite the opposite of those mentioned above. You might need to work at not being too independent, at accepting an appropriate level of guidance from your supervisor. Some supervisors mention that occasionally international students are inclined to totally ignore their advice and guidance. Doing this is not recommended. Supervisory input is important for many reasons, including ensuring the thesis meets the standards appropriate for the level of the degree, of which supervisors will certainly have the best understanding.
- **Entering the 'conversation' in a tutorial:** You may find the tutorial meeting a somewhat strange affair, with everyone talking at once. You may perhaps even think students disrespectful to the lecturer, and the tutorial unhelpful in providing instruction. But this is a matter of different cultural behaviour. Because of the emphasis on critical engagement, lecturers often choose not to provide answers, but will prefer instead to stimulate students to think for themselves by asking questions of them, allowing them to discuss issues as a group, to challenge each other's viewpoints and the lecturer's own, and to argue and debate at will. Some international students can find it difficult to join in, being too polite to interrupt others. If you have this problem, ask for your lecturer's help; try at every tutorial meeting to have just one point from your reading you want to introduce into the discussion – ask your lecturer if he or she could invite you to speak at an agreed-on signal. You will gradually become confident enough to enter this 'noisy' conversation.

- **Speaking confidently in English:** Most graduates worry about giving tutorials, seminars or conference presentations (see 'Oral and Visual Presentations' in Chapter 8), though not all have the added burden of speaking in a language not native to them. If pronunciation is a particular concern, ask an English-speaking friend, your lecturer/supervisor, or some other appropriate person to run through your paper with you to practise pronouncing words about which you are uncertain.
- **Conducting interpersonal relations:** In conducting interpersonal relations with lecturers and supervisors, you may find marked differences. You may need to be more pro-active in asking questions, in negotiating the terms of, say, a relationship with your supervisor, in adjusting to different forms of address (for example, using first names), or in setting discussion agendas for meetings with your supervisor. If you are asked to do the latter, between meetings with your supervisor keep notes on:
 - (a) Interesting ideas about or interpretations of your readings and data.
 - (b) Ideas you have about your overall research plan.
 - (c) Suggestions for changes in focus or direction of your research.
 - (d) Any uncertainties about or difficulties with content or research procedures that need discussing.
 - (e) Anything else you consider important to discuss.

If English language/expression is preventing you from communicating clearly in writing, consider various avenues of assistance:

- Find out what assistance your lecturer/supervisor is prepared to provide.
- Investigate assistance provided by academic skills, learning or writing services within your institution.
- Search for helpful Web materials or on-line services that focus on English grammar/expression/pronunciation.
- Identify whether there are courses for credit in English for Academic Purposes that you may be able to take.

Most useful is to practise your English in context. By this I mean in situations where you are actually in the process of producing the various texts required in your degree, or preparing your presentations. While this type of developmental assistance will help you to improve your control of English, it will not necessarily extend to a full editing service – that is to say, fixing the grammar. Where I consider there is a further need to profile second language issues, I do so in the appropriate context throughout this book.

Summary Comments

- Colleagues, friends and family can be wonderful sources of support if you cultivate their understanding.
- By taking steps to manage yourself and your writing you will reduce stress and increase your enjoyment of writing and other communication activities.
- Never be afraid to ask questions (however trivial they may seem) of your lecturers and supervisors who are there to help you develop skills and take control of writing and communication tasks.
- Be aware of, but not unduly anxious about, cross-cultural challenges you may need to address in writing and communication – you will overcome these.